

NIFC News

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FEDERAL FIREFIGHTING AGENCIES AND GSA RECALL NEW GENERATION FIRE SHELTERS

Boise, Idaho...The Federal firefighting agencies and the General Services Administration (GSA) are recalling 68,000 previously manufactured new generation fire shelters for a retrofit to strengthen a corner of the product. About 19,000 of the shelters are currently being carried by state, federal and contract firefighters.

Fire shelters are required equipment for firefighters, but are considered a tool of last resort and should never be needed if situational awareness, risk management and discipline are employed to make the right decisions in strategy and tactics on wildland fires.

In mid-March, an alert was submitted to the agencies' SAFENET program describing a tear that occurred during deployment practice. The SAFENET program is an anonymous reporting system firefighters use to alert managers to observed unsafe practices and allow managers to investigation or make corrections based on the report. According to the SAFENET, the tear was in the floor material near the shake handles used to quickly deploy the shelter.

Equipment specialists at the Forest Service's Missoula Technology and Development Center (MTDC) immediately researched the problem and confirmed that some shelters were tearing near the shake handles during deployment. All the tears were in the floor material with the floor coming away from the seam connecting the floor to the side of the shelter.

MTDC equipment specialists, in consultation with an outside engineering expert, believe the added risk associated with the potential tearing of the shelter is very small because the location of the weakness is in the floor. However, interagency fire management leadership, specialists at MTDC and GSA are taking immediate action to fix the problem in order to ensure that firefighters are provided the best quality product.

“No rips occurred during the extensive testing we did before the design went to the manufacturers. But we do acknowledge the issue, and have developed a fix in the design to strengthen the area of the shake handles,” said fire shelter specialist Leslie Anderson of MTDC.

The design fix is being applied to all newly manufactured shelters, and the shelters recalled will be retrofitted with an improvement to the handle. The eleven national fire caches are no longer distributing the new generation fire shelter until the retrofit has been completed, or newly manufactured shelters with the design fix are received.

State and federal firefighters should return the newer shelters to the nearest federal cache. Firefighters will use the older style shelter until supplies of the newly manufactured or retrofitted shelters become available. The older style shelters have saved 300 lives since the 1970’s, and provide good protection against radiant and thermal heat when deployed properly.

Some firefighters may not be able to obtain an older style shelter immediately due to the limited number, but the newly manufactured shelters and the retrofitted shelters will be available widely within the next two months. According to the manufacturers, retrofitting should proceed quickly, at the rate of approximately 3,000 to 5,000 per week, plus production of about 5,000 per month of the newly manufactured shelters.
